

CHAPTER 8

UGCWELE UKUDLALA: WAYS OF SEEING, LEARNING AND KNOWING THROUGH SERIOUS PLAY

By Noluthando Mpho Sibisi

PROLOGUE

In the past my grandmother was a seer.

That is, she often sat quietly, observing, listening for signs and symbols. She had roots, routes, and rituals; a rumbling in her chest, a groan, a moan, a bone to throw, to pick, to decipher. It was always at home, in her bedroom, with her door closed that she silently saw. *Ugcwele ukudlala/Hamb'o dlala ngaphandle/Hamb'o dlala nabanye abantwana*. Although I was more interested in her ways of seeing, I was always encouraged towards the work of play, outside, with other children.

I would reluctantly leave her ritual to join the ceremony led by my age-mates outside. My time spent with my peers saw me showing them how to see as well. This always looked like turning over and 'reading' stones, often while conjuring up a burp. Sometimes, I would touch their cotton clothes and then proceed to 'solve' their futures. I grew to love reading and replicating action in these ways; I relished the practice and the playing.

Ugcwele ukudlala. On her less demanding days, my grandmother would lend me her seeing eye, her listening ear, her ticking time and observe my close study and emulation of her aforementioned actions. She would usually laugh and remark, "*Ugcwele ukudlala*". Which is to say, "You play too much/You are full to the brim with play/You are playful".

HAMB'O DLALA NGAPHANDLE: ROOTS, ROUTES AND RITUALS TOWARDS PLAY

At the end of 2021 I completed an MA in Theatre and Performance at the University of Cape Town. My minor dissertation, titled *Sexuality and cultural heritage at odds: I Fuck What I Like, an ode to the young queer black woman in South Africa*, functioned to complicate what I was arguing to be an insistent narrative and the consequent depiction of queer black womanhood as emblematic of abjection in the performance and literary canon. I proposed that an investigation of queer black joy could offer alternative ways into writing and performing more dynamic queer black woman narratives within the said canon.

I write this chapter as a reflection on the research strategies and methodologies that I employed throughout my MA programme. Through a close study of the interdisciplinary literary, visual and performance processes that preceded the writing and staging of my

final performance piece *IFuck What I Like*, I will centre the performance as both the artefact and the research outcome of my inquiry.

My key framing statement for the research was: queer black womanhood is not emblematic of abjection: a statement informed in part by the works of Koleka Putuma, Zanele Muholi and Athi-Patra Ruga as my artistic influences. This chapter will function as a documentation of the roots, routes and rituals that informed my readings and replications of the black queer counterculture offered by the above-mentioned artists. From these artists I garnered ode, collage and multivocality as research methods that informed my use of serious play and scripted autoethnographic reflections.

1. HAMB'O: GO, AND FIND THEORETICAL ROOTING

At the beginning of my MA I was facilitated through a series of morning practical sessions referred to as 'studios'. During these studios I, along with the rest of the MA cohort, was guided through an investigation of "ritual, space, time, embodiment and mixed media visualising" to name a few components of performance-making. In the course of the practical sessions, I was encouraged to actively think about two major tenets of my research: one of them was the theoretical anchors for my performance project and the other was the creative outputs that I was discovering while responding to the above-mentioned components of performance.

Both the search for theoretical influences and the creative output of the research project were meant to help me flesh out my research material and personal performance semiotics. This was so that I could, at a later stage, dissect the material and semiotics to uncover my performance as my research outcome. Each instance of guided in-studio exploration was underpinned by the assertion that an investigation of my artistic practice could "be viewed as the production of knowledge" (Barrett, 2007:1).

I grappled with this research approach suggesting that knowledge could be "derived from doing and from the senses" (Barrett, 2007:1) and centred studio practice as integral to the generation of new knowledge and understanding of my research inquiry and outcome. PaR posed a challenge for me, in that it was a difficult methodology to understand and quantify in terms of traditional scholarship. Lloyd P. Rieber (2001) proposes that the concept of design suggests "a planned intervention to solve a problem, fill a need or realize an opportunity [...] unlike art, design is constrained by purpose and parameter" (Rieber, 2001:2). Thus the challenge of designing research in a discipline that seemingly contradicted what was expected of research. There was, from the outset, a schism between my subjective artistic practice (which did not require empirical or theoretical justification) and my obligations as a researcher in academia (which was accompanied by an expectation for scholarly rigour evidenced by engagement with, and the citation of, other scholarship).

While I considered the need to justify my position as a researcher and present applicable and profitable research outcomes, I also took into serious consideration that,

The innovation and critical potential of practice based research lies in its capacity to generate personally situated knowledge and new ways of

modelling and externalising such knowledge while at the same time, revealing philosophical social and cultural context for the critical intervention and application of knowledge outcomes. (Barrett, 2007:2)

The search for a grand design was for me, to borrow from Dianne Reid, “a process of accumulation rather than elimination” (2001:48). Like Reid, I too discovered that I was informed by an array of art forms which required that I consider a variety of vantage points from which to observe and respond to my holistic condition as practitioner and researcher. I used serious play as a strategy to achieve the potential of PaR where “innovation is derived from methods that cannot always be predetermined and outcomes of artistic practice are necessarily unpredictable” (Barrett, 2007:3). I will now map my attempt at bridging what I understood as the gap between traditional scholarship and PaR.

DLALA: PLAY YOUR WAY THROUGH/TO ROUTES

I introduce play here as an “ambiguous phenomenon” (Rieber, 2001:4) and as a “means for understanding motivation and learning in a holistic way” (Rieber, 2001:1). As cited in Rieber (2001:4), Brian Sutton asserts that, although we are all familiar with play as a concept and feeling, we fail to reach a consensus on what theoretical statements are true about what play is. Rieber also distinguishes serious play from ordinary play by suggesting that serious play extends beyond diversion, frivolity and triviality. Serious play is characterised as play “that has purpose”, and Rieber advises that “experience first, explain later” (2001:4) is a useful way of understanding serious play. Here, the event and experience of play is fundamental to understanding how one plays. I argue that this take on serious play as “elusive but always ready to emerge” resonates with some of the core principles of PaR as experimental grounds on which one creates conditions to encounter instances, surprises, possibility and contradictions with self, the empirical world, and others. At the core of both PaR and serious play is experience as a verb. What is implicit here is that knowledge can be gathered from the process of consciously encountering one’s physical actions, thoughts and ways of being. Therefore, the responsibility of the research practitioner is to rigorously reflect on the experiences they come across during their practice or serious play, while also acknowledging that the ambiguous nature of their process necessitates that their practice continuously interrogates itself.

LLOYD RIEBER’S SERIOUS PLAY

Lloyd Rieber distinguishes serious play from ordinary play by suggesting that serious play extends beyond diversion, frivolity and triviality. Serious play is characterised as play “that has purpose”, but looks to “experience first, explain later”. (2001:4)

Noluthando advocates for serious play as resonating with some of the core principles of PaR as experimental grounds on which one creates conditions to

encounter instances, surprises, possibility and contradictions with self, the empirical world, and others.

In my examination of my practice I had to become a seer. That is, I had to actively observe and listen to myself and my performance semiotics. Rehearsing and sifting through the signs and symbols signifying my ideas about how I personally arrived at blackhood, womanhood and queerhood reminded me of how I had first encountered Koleka Putuma's poem "Black joy" (2017:12). I searched through my own groans and moans to arrive at my discomfort and agreement with the sentiment shared in the poem. In "Black joy" Putuma argues for the existence of black people's joy in a performance and literary culture that predominantly insists on seeing the racial category that is blackness as, to borrow from Arthur Jafa, "the emblem of abjection" and "the repositories of badness" (Jafa, 2019:n.p). I had a bone to throw, to pick and decipher. I had multiple stones to turn in order to fully appreciate and make sense of my visceral response to Putuma's offering.

It is worth mentioning here that in the early stages of this research timeline I encountered severe and unexpected contradictions as my practice was brought to a standstill by the COVID 19 pandemic. What was once in-person studio work was substituted for uncertainty under the strict national lockdown regulations. During this time I had to consider the potential presented by this new condition. In retrospect this was my personal rediscovery of home as an intimate space. I, once again, could read the bedroom as symbolic of interiority and intimate practices. It is here that I could make sense of Barrett's assertion about PaR (2001:2): being stuck at home presented me with the opportunity and possibility of making external and bringing into scholarly light my personally situated knowledge concerning the nuances of black subjectivity. During this time, when community and collaboration could only exist on laptop screens and cellphones, I silently saw new ways of modelling this situated knowledge within the social and cultural context I was a part of. What became apparent to me were the ongoing attempts by other artists to offer critical intervention and application of knowledge outcomes generated through PaR. Primarily I watched as others played towards self-actualisation during a particularly precarious time in our immediate present.

One of the artists who appealed to me during the pandemic was Zanele Muholi who, at the time, was working on a series of 31 painted self-portraits. Muholi presented this process on their Instagram page and I was inspired to replicate it. In my version of the exercise in self-portraiture, I decided to use photography instead of paint as my medium. Over a series of 14 days, I would wake up and curate colour-coordinated photoshoots of myself within the comfort of my home. The ritual for preparing for each shoot included my creating collages from magazine cut-outs. These collages were informed by my personal musings around my ideas of self, my complexities and the imagery I could collect to represent these. Other times, the musings were about depictions of queer black woman joy and/or ordinary life as a strategy for social reform. I would then go on to choose an outfit and design a backdrop against which to stage



Figure 8.1: An image of a collage I made in the colour yellow and a collage in the colour red.
Artwork by Noluthando Mpho Sibisi.

Using my home space as a studio inspired multiple written reflections, some in the form of lyrical poetry or ode. The ode, as a conceptual framework, helped me signpost the route of my probing while also acting as a memorandum and formal address to the subject of my inquiry, “The young queer black woman in South Africa”. By investigating and rehearsing the traditional forms of the ode, I eventually structured this lyrical poem, which I incorporated into the final performance:

And what do we say when we speak of you
Many things are true,
That you were born a black woman in possession
Of the physical and practical traits of sex?
That your body can be read as an index
Of your inherited cultural disposition: abjection?

And what shall we say when we speak of you
Many things are actually true
like the laughter belonging to you by reason of birth
the ease with which you command the most daring vowel:
“l...”
Like your passion with lover’s arms knotted around your girth
Holding in place the rapture in your rearranged bowel:

“...fuck what I like” (whatever that is)
You are a devotion.

The material arising from and surrounding the photoshoots brought to the forefront of my inquiry the usefulness of multivocality as an autoethnographic method. This method could help me illustrate that I, as a researcher, writer, director, performer and visual artist did not possess “a single and temporally fixed voice” (Mizzi, 2010:1).

Alain de Botton (2020) reflects on rituals as being the most effective when they do not,

so much impose upon us ideas we are opposed to but take us back to ideas we are in deep agreement with yet have allowed to lapse: they are an externally mandated route to inner authenticity. (De Botton, 2020:15)

By executing the above-mentioned ritual during interventions of serious play, I arrived time and time again at my personal known, but unattended, thoughts and beliefs about my research interest, the potential of my research methods, as well as the research outcomes. Through playing with the above-mentioned process and materials I could elevate my ordinary home space to a space of ritual and then return it to its function of housing some of my most intimate identity markers and desires. This centring of my own creative choices and imagination, gave me permission to nuance the details of my subjective experiences and divert attention away from what I argued to be a pervasive mainstream insistence to reduce queer black woman narratives to only those of victimhood and trauma.

It was during this productivity peak that I also encountered a work titled *Of Gods, Rainbows and Omissions* by Athi-Patra Ruga (2018). Ruga, a visual and performance artist, was concerned with character and world-making in the production of this body of work. He makes use of multiple media and in his address of socio-political issues that are of importance to him. What intrigued me and guided me in making sense of my own character and world-making is Ruga's ongoing use of colour and the idea throughout his work that colour can be used to "disarm people" (2015). In my personal reflections and reading of Ruga's work, I mused that the mixing of media and centring of colour divorces the viewer from the proverbial "black and white" way of reading visual texts "filling the white noise of intergenerational silence with [both] factual and made up stories" (Ruga, 2015). Here, history is revised and the future is imagined using layering, texturing, colouring and collage.



Figure 8.2: Self-portrait in the colour yellow. Photograph by Noluthando Mpho Sibisi.



Figure 8.3: Self-portrait in the colour red. Photograph by Noluthando Mpho Sibisi.



Figure 8.4: Self-portrait in the colour blue. Photograph by Noluthando Mpho Sibisi.

After purposefully playing with Putuma's literary claim to personal black joy, intimacy and pleasure, emulating Muholi's process of self-portraiture and collaging alongside Ruga's multiple media, I arrived at the research methods of multivocality, ode and collage. Through repeated engagement with and reflection on these methods as my personal manifestation of serious play, I finally reached an autoethnographic exploration in which I could confidently script the characters Echo, Shadow and Reflection as manifestations of personal multiplicity and complexity.

NGAPHANDLE NABANYE ABANTWANA: MAKE A RITUAL OF PLAYING OUTSIDE WITH OTHERS

I tasked myself with bringing my understandings and articulations of queer black woman joy to the forefront of my performance studies. I was hoping that by doing so I could offer practical and updated routes towards writing and performing queer black woman interiority, multiplicity and complexity. Making use of serious play and elevating ordinary tasks into ritual, I uncovered personal gestures, images, and objects; personal semiotics of joy and complexity. It was through careful observation of my daily life and preoccupations that I could notate, theorise, analyse, and interpret personal signs and symbols that pointed my final performance beyond the confines of a representation of queer black womanhood as abject and characterised by victimhood and trauma narratives.

Most of the methods and methodologies I have identified in this paper required a level of fluidity that meant I would have to quickly abandon the notion of a personal fixed voice in favour of an ambiguous and sometimes obscure process. Depending on my daily contexts and contestations, my landscaping as an auto-ethnographer who is making connections between the “personal self and the social context” (Mizzi, 2010:1) was derived from differing digital explorations. The photography process, for example, gave rise to other processes such as digital painting, video and social media content. The obscurity manifested as a non-linear, sometimes non-categorisable and multidimensional writing voice.

In an attempt to situate this voice within an academic inquiry I made use of Heewon Chang’s *Autoethnography* as method (2008) to script three voices from the character and world-making I have been describing throughout this paper. I named the voices: Reflection, Shadow, and Echo. While each of these voices was a manifestation of my personal thoughts and research, they each had a distinguishing quality as an autoethnographic writing voice. The criterion for Reflection was a descriptive and realistic voice, Shadow occupied the script as an emotive and confessional voice and Echo’s voice existed as an impressionistic and imaginative poetic account. In order to make sense of how I was going to stage these voices I, once more, made use of collage as a method to combine the various mediums I had been working in. My performance of the final iteration of *I Fuck What I Like*, as both an artefact of my research inquiry and the research outcome, saw me collaging the various paintings, photography, voice-over, physical performance, digital art and Instagram filters into a performance space, aptly named the Playroom, on Hiddingh Campus at UCT.



Figures 8.5, 8.6, 8.7, 8.8: Noluthando Mpho Sibisi, *I Fuck What I Like*, ICA Live Art Festival 2022. Photographs by Xolani Tulumani, courtesy Institute for Creative Arts and the artist.

Through this process, I identify my turn to non-survival activities, using the example of the ritual of getting dressed, taking pictures, and posting them on social media daily, as subjective and serious play. The choice to play into and through the MA was meant to explicitly insert a generative response to what I was arguing to be dominant narratives of queer black womanhood. Focusing on a non-survival activity, such as playing in my artistic practice as research, proved both challenging and invaluable during the pandemic, a period when survival was a global thematic concern. This paper traces how I learned to lend to myself my seeing eye, my listening ear and my ticking time to observe my own studies and emulation of the multiple identity markers and realities that made up my experience of the world of performance and literature. By extension my reflections reflected back to me the social and cultural landscaping that necessitated my attempts at staging queer black woman joy and subjective agentic will. Having traced my relationship with play as a childhood practice that often constituted a form of research, knowledge and world making, I confidently assert that what has allowed me to be fully immersed in PaR as methodology was a conviction to turn back to play and play seriously.

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